

Legacy and Hope
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Has there ever been a time in history in need of more hope than today? Perhaps every age could look at the dark side and say the same. However, in our time, modern technology makes us acutely and profoundly aware of the darkness, not only in our own cities and country but in every corner of the world. And we don't just hear or read about it, we see images day after day; we actually hear the cries and weeping of those who suffer. How is it we are not overwhelmed with despair?

His Holiness Pope Francis has stepped into these dark times and asked us to proclaim a Gospel of Joy. ...to not give into despair but to truly believe that in the midst of darkness there is Light; that in the midst of suffering and anguish the compassionate, healing, resurrected Jesus is present. Pope Francis urges ministers of the Gospel to show this face of God and urges the Church itself to become a field hospital, healing the wounds of those who have been afflicted, bringing loving attentiveness to those who have been robbed of hope. Over and over again he asks us to go to the peripheries.....to encounter and accompany the very people who are on the edges.

On April 8th, 1858, at 3 in the morning, four young Sisters of Saint Ann and a lay woman companion left all that they had known in what they described as the cradle of their religious life (St. Jacques, Quebec) and as they continued their journey a few days later, they left and I quote, "our beautiful Canada, 'our' country ... what we hold dearest on earth..." [end of quote] They were leaving forever.....for them and for those they left behind there was no expectation of meeting again on earth. And where were they going? They were leaving for the peripheries of their time....an unknown "country" called Fort Victoria.

For the next two months they accompanied Bishop Modeste Demers on a somewhat harrowing trip that took them by train to New York City then by ship down the East Coast to the Caribbean, with a stop in Cuba; across Panama by train and then up the West Coast, again by ship. Fortunately, one of the Sisters, Sister Mary Angele, kept a diary, not daily, but enough to

help us understand a little of what it was like. So exactly 160 years ago the day before yesterday, they passed Mazatlan near the opening to the Gulf of California. Their ship had 200 staterooms and 1600 on board, including crew. Passengers represented every nationality, Germans, Swiss, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, American, French, Canadian and various ethnicities and religions. All along the way their fellow passengers were heading for the gold fields of California and, as they got further north, the gold of the Fraser River. None of their fellow passengers could grasp that the Sisters were not also going to the gold fields...that instead, what they wanted to do was teach children "on the periphery" where there was no opportunity for even a basic education, which the Sisters believed was necessary for a person to attain the fullness of life. The ship itself might have been considered a periphery...it was certainly a culture shock and at times the Sisters feared for their very lives!

Their arrival in Victoria on June 5th was another culture shock: the Fort, situated in the midst of First Nations land and inhabitants, had mushroomed, with the gold rush, to 200 houses and over 30,000 tents. Escorted to the cabin the Bishop had purchased for them before his departure a year earlier, they discovered that the log joints had not been filled in and there was no ceiling; it was divided into two rooms by rough lumber. Not only that, nothing had changed since a woman had died in the small cabin many months before...bed unmade, floor littered with medicine bottles, basin, etc and window panes cracked or broken. Fortunately, a kind woman brought them some water, coals and wood. As Sister Mary Angele states, "the first act of charity we received and not the last."

Two days later the Sisters accepted indigenous, metis and settler children as students and began to go out and care for the sick and dying in their homes. This, indeed, was the periphery.....and they were propelled not only by their faith and love but by an enduring hope that they, small and seemingly insignificant as they were, could make a difference, if they remained open to God's Spirit working within them and responded to the needs of those around them.

This is the legacy we have received and that the Sisters of Saint Ann in Victoria continue today, as we, too, in our time, few as we are (27), aging as

we are (avg age of 84), strive to continue to make a difference by sharing hope with those who might be considered on the periphery.

Returning to our courageous pioneers, what kind of individuals were these women? How did they do it? We are fortunate to know a fair amount about their lives, the challenges they faced and what we have come to call their “creative audacity” in responding to those challenges. These women were deeply spiritual, bonded together by their life of faith and prayer and their desire to make God known to all those who crossed their paths. As well, they were strong, physically and psychologically; they were resilient ... and perhaps most important, they had a sense of humour and were supported by one another and by the people they had come to serve and who welcomed them.

Some of us have had the privilege of going to the peripheries of today’s world, whether it be in our own cities, far-off parts of Canada or elsewhere in the world. We have inserted ourselves into and been welcomed by people of other cultures, people who speak different languages and have different ways of perceiving the world. As we lose our accustomed ways of being in the world and of being viewed by others, we discover that we have brought our own vulnerabilities with us. Like Jesus, who in becoming one with us *did not count equality with God something to be grasped... but [he] emptied himself*, we, too, empty ourselves, not grasping at previous forms of esteem, entitlement and accomplishment. We become one with those in whose midst we dwell. As we do so, removed from our usual supports, our vulnerabilities can easily rise up to plague us, leading us to question our value, identity and beliefs and often leading to behaviours that can be diminishing of ourselves and others.

I wonder if Pope Francis thinks of that when he urges us to go to the peripheries. Some do it from the comfort of their own homes and cultures, of course, and go in and out of what is “other.” As Pope Francis urged, this can be helpful in understanding the realities of “the other.” To immerse oneself in the periphery, however, is deeply challenging and I believe it requires the same qualities as our missionaries of 1858, a deep spirituality, psychological preparedness and a supportive community.

In the 10 years I served in the Northwest Territories we came to realize that it was easy to take on the weaknesses of the communities in which we had

inserted ourselves; so many of the people we served suffered from generations of displacement, cultural oppression and loss of self-esteem, resulting in a variety of addictions and violence; Many struck out at us in anger and many turned to suicide as a solution to their loss of hope. Psychologists today would likely suggest that many pastoral workers living in these conditions are at high risk for post-traumatic stress.

What did we as pastoral workers living in small, isolated communities, need to not become discouraged, bitter and depressed? In the time I was there one priest took his own life and a lay pastoral worker attempted suicide. Unfortunately, except among a few of us, these shocking tragedies were not discussed or reflected upon to try to identify factors that might have led to them and that therefore might be addressed. Mental illness or vulnerability among “church” workers was not, even then, a conversation we could engage in collectively....still a taboo topic. Although that was some years ago I suspect it has not changed. However, I suggest that in our times, such conversations are needed more than ever. Unlike previously, priests and lay pastoral workers are often not living with others but alone in isolated communities, without the support and resources needed to live healthily. Many of them are far from their own countries and support systems. It becomes easy to seek solace in a variety of addictions, including the latest technology.

Today, no matter where we are, the periphery is with us....displaced peoples suffering from successive and sometimes generational trauma; people, especially youth, suffering from depression and other forms of mental illness; victims of economies that rip people apart in so many ways...the list goes on. And we, ministers of the Gospel, are called to be a healing, joyful presence in their midst, proclaiming joy, showing love, and bringing a message of hope. Weak with our own foibles, we, too, often need healing so that the Divine can flow through us to others.

For 40 years, Southdown has provided specialized help to those committed to proclaiming the Good News. Increasingly, ministers of the Gospel come from countries that have been torn apart by colonialism, natural disaster and war and they need the support of Southdown to continue to serve with hope-filled joy, whether in their own countries or elsewhere. I suggest that a further need is making your resources and expertise available to those serving in

far-off parts of Canada where many ministers of the Gospel live in isolation and have few resources. Many are local lay people or couples from “the South” and costs of individuals coming to Ontario or you going there would be prohibitive. I encourage you, however, to find a way even if it’s by distance education or webinars.

As we, the Sisters of Saint Ann, bring our active ministry in the Pacific Northwest to closure we have drawn on the legacy of our early pioneers who came to us, the periphery, bringing a message of hope. We are nearing the end of a more than 25 year process of discerning the future of our institutions and other assets and significantly changing how we live our vowed religious life. With the same “creative audacity” as those who went before us we identified the peripheries of our time that needed a message of hope and transferred our institutions or assets to organizations that could continue our mission in these areas. As we prepare to celebrate our 160th anniversary, the message we repeatedly hear is that our actions have given rise to new life that will continue far into the future and for this we are grateful.

All of you here, members of the board, staff and supporters are committed to the mission of Southdown. Please accept our deepest gratitude for the service you provide to those who strive to proclaim the Good News. It is a privilege for the Sisters of Saint Ann to partner with you in continuing to be bearers of hope in today’s world.